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# Borderline Imagery in Painting

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BORDERLINE IMAGERY IN PAINTING

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FOR THE DEGREE MASTER OF FINE ARTS  
IN THE COLLEGE OF FINE AND APPLIED ARTS

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MR. LAWRENCE WILLIAMS, ADVISOR

TO MY WIFE, MARIAN

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to explore painted imagery which lies between distinguishable form and pure abstract form. Perhaps the best definition of the subject, as approached here, will be found in the paintings which constitute the Thesis Project, for there the most significant exploration will be done.

One of the most important characteristics of this subject is the personal and intimate quality dominating the production of such imagery, and it is this quality which surrounds its explanation with mystery and intangibility.

## THE ROAD NOT TAKEN

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

ROBERT FROST<sup>1</sup>

## II. THE SUBJECT

My choice of the subject "Borderline Imagery in Painting" was not by chance; and yet I have had reason to wonder in recent months and weeks why I chose it. As a matter of fact, I have been fascinated by the idea of a combination of the reflected image of the eye and the symbolic image of the imagination for several years. I am aware that this is not a new idea; still, for me, it seems very personal. Perhaps my religious life has something to do with this. As a Protestant Christian my life is centered in the Scriptures and in faith in the Word to whom they point.<sup>2</sup> This is not mysticism, for I think of my faith as dynamic and practical, but this spiritual aspect may influence my artistic interest in that which is within and around and underneath the things we see in daily life.

The subject designation "borderline imagery" was originated with the help of Mr. Phillip Bornarth during the 1966 summer session. This is an exciting and evocative term which describes my aim perfectly.



However, in trying to verbalize this visual idea, I have found it to be somewhat of a will-o-the-wisp or a mirage: it defies simple definition.

In a general sense, most of the painting for over one hundred and fifty years involves borderline imagery, for any painted form which lies between the fringes of pure representation and a point at which abstraction gives way to non-objective or non-representational art can be labeled borderline imagery. In this sense the subject reaches back to the very beginnings of painting.

What, then, is the specific subject? Surely, it is not all of art history. No, I am involved with my personal fringe imagery, which has a more limited historical precedent--going back through the symbolists of the late nineteenth century. This imagery is contrasted to the "image" or representational likeness of the reality perceived in direct optic sensation. And yet, my study lies in a marginal relation to this kind of "image"--it alludes to the reality of the perceived material world, but it emphasizes the poetic reality of the imagination.

### III. RESEARCH

My reading program, which began during the winter months and continued in sporadic moments between working hours into the spring, quickening in pace in June to full research activity as the summer session opened, has proven extremely rewarding. And, while there may be some question as to its value in the studio, reading can bring a sense of continuity to an artist's understanding of his own work.

Authors and volumes which I found particularly important were Etienne Gilson's Painting and Reality, Kurt Badt's The Art of Cezanne, H. L. C. Jaffe's Twentieth Century Painting, Marcel Jean's The History of Surrealist Painting and the writings of John Rewald on Post-Impressionism. Since it is impossible to put into this report the generous amount of information (from these and other sources--see Selected Bibliography) which had a direct or indirect bearing on my subject, I will confine my discussion to five brief explanations of especially pertinent features: Reality, Visual Metaphor and Allusion, Automatism and Symbolism.

#### IV. REALITY

Without becoming involved in a philosophical treatment of the subject, I must now try to relate the problem of reality to my thesis. Until the end of the nineteenth century painters had not wrestled with the question--"what is reality?" In the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries artists had thoroughly investigated the reality they knew. "At the end of the nineteenth century painting became in fact, and explicitly, a view of life, a Weltanschauung, in the most literal sense: the artist viewed the world in order to give an account of its reality content, its truth."<sup>3</sup>

Gustave Courbet had exemplified the positivist view of reality--"the idea that reality and what the eyes see are identical."<sup>4</sup> Charles Baudelaire laid foundations for what was to come when he intimated "that along with (or indeed underneath) the positive, tangible reality there might be another, essential reality: the reality which is not bound up with the material (world) . . . and so is accessible to neither the eye nor the hand, but only to the imagination."<sup>5</sup>

In the twentieth century a polarity of artistic attitudes toward reality has developed. At the one pole is the traditional, positivist reality (Courbet); along the axis is the essential reality of Baudelaire and the Symbolist artists at the end of the nineteenth century, the Fauves, the Cubists; then the various purist and non-representational approaches (Piet Mondrian, Kasimir Malevich, and Wassily Kandinsky) at the opposite pole. In the full development of Cubism and the "supreme" art forms reality tends to be discovered within art itself.

Regarding reality or existence, Etienne Gilson has written:

Strictly speaking, the word "being" should be used only in connection with that which enjoys the fullness of being, without any restriction or qualification. Philosophers usually agree that, if there is a God, his nature precisely consists in enjoying the permanent possession of absolute being or, better still, in "being" it. Thus understood, the notion of being excludes those of change, of beginning and of end. Being is, and that is about all there is to say about it. Even though we may have reasons to affirm its reality, no such being is given in human experience. All the things we see and touch are particular



and qualified beings. They are so many entities that endure in time between the moment each of them comes to be and the moment each of them finally passes away. The type of reality that characterizes such entities is less that of being, properly so called, than that of becoming . . . Most of us would agree that the kind of entity proper to things given in human experience is "existence" rather than "being."<sup>6</sup>

The relationship of borderline imagery to the realities I have discussed might best be described as a "shifting relationship"--a study of the "existence" of things.

#### V. METAPHOR

The term metaphor suggests literary associations--we think of syntax and the poetry of painting. There is, also, a musical sound to the term. The metaphorical references in a painting are forms which have a rhyming relationship of repetition. The metaphor is more than a rhyme or pure repetition of an element; it takes on the complexity of comparison. "Metaphor might be regarded as a special case of rhyming in which an element of one object which is similar to that of another object is made identical, or nearly so."<sup>7</sup>

There is a tension, an implied tangent force (often both literary and formal aspects are involved), set up between two or more elements. In reverse, the visual metaphor is produced when multiple ideas or meanings come into existence through form relationships.

Many Cubist works exhibit the metaphorical device. Perhaps the best examples are found in the paintings of Juan Gris. Closer to our own times, the visual metaphor was used with great fluid subtlety by the Armenian Arshile Gorky.

## VI. ALLUSION

Like the visual metaphor, allusion in painting has dominant associational features and often literary connotations. Perhaps the major difference is that the metaphor acts within the painting, while in the allusion covert reference is made to something outside the work of art. Allusion is the more profound. Its beauty lies in the subtlety of its diffusion and in its depth of meaning.

Discussing allusion, parody, and quotation in the work of Arshile Gorky, Harold Rosenberg had this to say about allusion:

To the degree that depiction gave way to various systems of allusion--emotional reference evoked by color, by shape, by movement--"abstract" art became possible. In this century every major work of art, whether pictorial or not, is charged--the word is Ezra Pound's--with allusion; to things or events, read, dreamed or half remembered.<sup>8</sup>

Through allusion the artist is freed from the need of depiction "without loss of meaning," since "by allusion the thing alluded to is both there and not there."<sup>9</sup>

## VII. AUTOMATISM

A personal studio procedure, which has developed for me in my pursuit of borderline imagery, has been phases of very subjective activity (I have called it "intuitive painting"). It is less the "sense of discovery"<sup>10</sup> intuition of which Joyce Cary writes, and more a subconscious painting--akin to "automatism." The historic automatism of the Symbolist poets (e.g., Andre Breton, Philippe Soupault and Robert Desnos), who were so closely linked with the Surrealist movement, tended to wane as writers became disenchanted with automatic writing experiments when these proved fruitless. However, the interest among artists in probing the subconscious

continued strongly, and hallucinatory images were often used by the surrealist artists. Max Ernst is an excellent example.

It remained for the Abstract Expressionists (or action painters) to revive certain aspects of automatism. Jackson Pollock built into his work an almost totally automatic procedure. There are indications that his automatism was reaching a limit at the time of his death.

In his book The History of Surrealist Painting, Marcel Jean makes this engaging statement regarding automatic activity:

Habit tends to make a conscious action nothing less than automatic and monotonous; inversely, it introduces a factor of monotony, of real stereotype, into any too prolonged or too often repeated unconscious experience.<sup>11</sup>

And he further states that monotony and disillusionment are the two hazards of automatic activity.<sup>12</sup>

The important aspect to be seen in these thoughts on automatism is the need for a dynamic balance between the use of conscious and subconscious activity--and a sense of knowing when to shift gears. The artist is not to be wholly irrational, but must exist in suspension between rational judgment and



"intuitive" action. A work of art is not accomplished in random subconsciousness: an order and system of extremely delicate and critical balance must sustain this magnetized suspension in a state of fluid involvement, and project itself into the aesthetic and physical work of art.

#### VIII. SYMBOLISM

A symbol is generally thought of as a sign with compound meanings. The Greek letters Alpha and Omega have come to signify "the beginning and the end"--suggesting a great deal more than two individual characters in an alphabet. There are many kinds of symbolism in painting. In Marc Chagall we see a sweet mysticism which caused his friend, the poet Guillaume Apollinaire, to describe his work as "Supernatural!"<sup>13</sup> There is the imperative symbolism of Max Beckman, with its foreboding of tragedy. There are the subconscious ("psychoanalytical") symbols exemplified in the work of Gorky. Cultural symbols are seen in the paintings of the Dutch masters of the seventeenth century and, of course, in the Pop art of our own times. There are

the complex systems of religious iconography from cultures all over the world and throughout history.

I would like to mention briefly one interesting instance of symbolism which my research uncovered. In his book The Art of Cezanne, Kurt Badt discusses Cezanne and symbolism. Badt develops the idea that Cezanne did not consciously push toward abstraction (it remained for the Fauves and the Cubists to carry this trend forward), but worked for a new symbolism: a spiritualization to avoid "exteriority"--a sign to symbolize the material world. His art was entirely different from that of the symbolists, such as Gauguin and van Gogh. Cezanne strove toward the "unshakeable objectiveness" in objects. "What was novel about it was that it turned all external appearances of real things into a symbol of 'being,' 'which is eternal.'"14

I am not "aiming" for symbolism in the abstract imagery of my thesis, although it is inevitable that some kind of symbolic reference, or allusion, will be seen, for this is a major characteristic in marginal imagery.

**Thesis Project**



## IX. THESIS PROJECT

The four paintings shown in photographs on the following pages were constructed and painted during the first five weeks of the summer session. The addition of constructed forms is comparatively new in my paintings, having been attempted for the first time at the close of last summer.

In the early stages painting number one crystallized into a set of simple relations, which called for the chaste, high key in which it is done. The main imagery suggests a table with its appointed objects. Colors, as well as small relief forms, were added and removed until the painted and constructed forms seemed to function aptly with the overall simplicity of the painting.

Both paintings number two and three have more "intuitive painting" as part of their initial build-up procedure than does painting number one. In painting number two a figure is implied--perhaps an apparition. Painting number three makes less specific allusion to nature, exhibiting a more general metaphorical imagery instead.

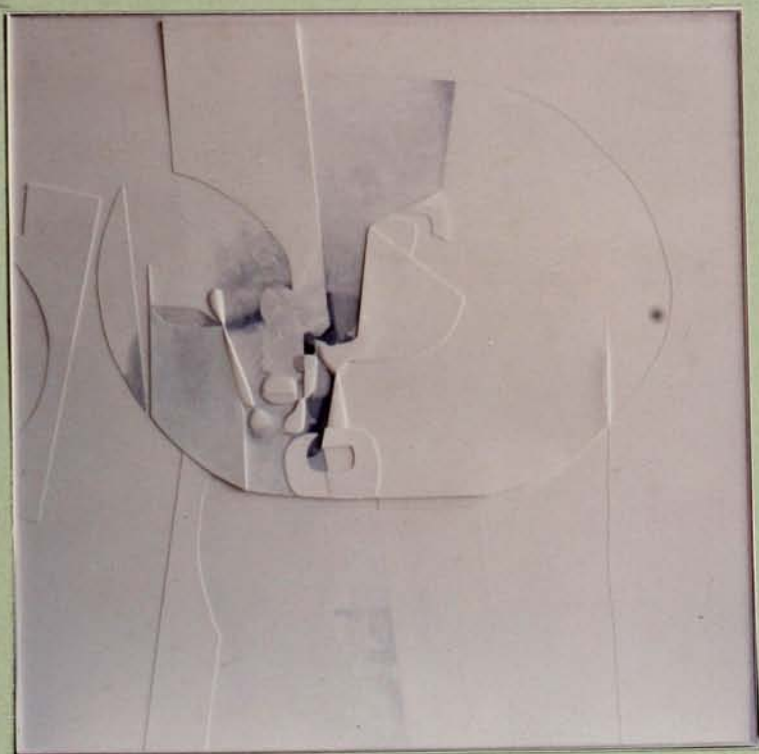
Number four is a painting with sharper delineation--geometric forms contrasted against the texture of a collage and painted treatment in the center of the work. While the technical handling is more two dimensional, there is an intimation of greater space than the other paintings show.

With these paintings I feel I have only begun to discover the possibilities of peripheral imagery. It will be noted, for example, that the imagery tends toward the abstract fringes of the borderline field. I would like to see a balance develop between the image and the abstract form in my paintings.

The Thesis Project is the climax in my graduate studies; and I believe that I have accomplished that which was originally set as an objective in my Statement of Purpose for admission to the Master of Fine Arts program--to further my professional ability in painting (in actual studio work). As I complete this program, I feel that this is not an end but a beginning.







PAINTING NUMBER ONE:  
48 x 48 inches  
Acrylic and construction on masonite panel

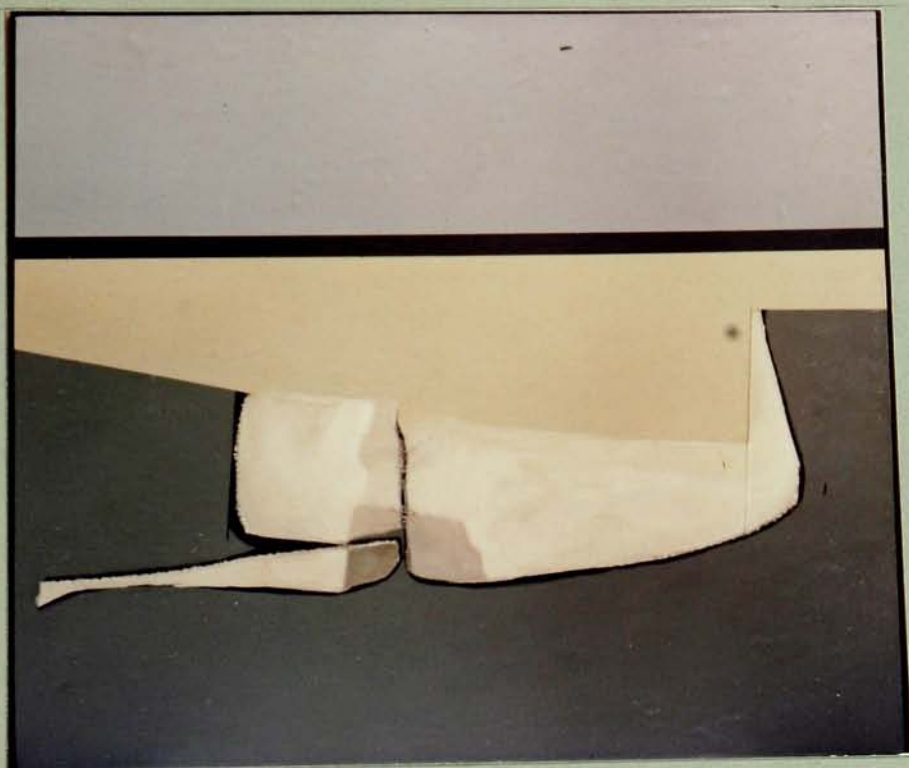


PAINTING NUMBER TWO:  
48 x 60 inches  
Acrylic and construction on masonite panel

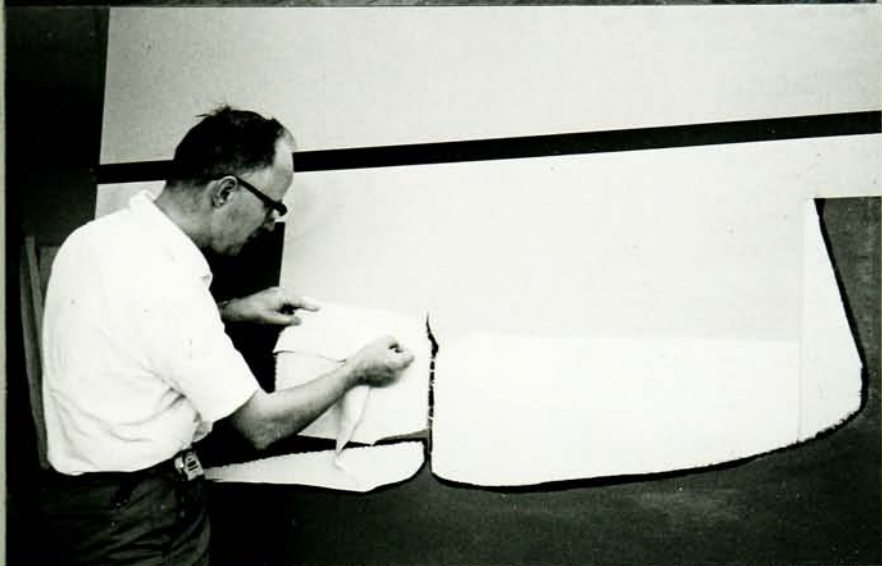




PAINTING NUMBER THREE:  
48 x 48 inches  
Acrylic and construction on masonite panel



PAINTING NUMBER FOUR:  
60 x 70 inches  
Acrylic and oil with lucite on canvas







## X. CONCLUSION

The preceding material is an abridged selection from research done in the general area of peripheral, or borderline, imagery in painting. I did not find anything written specifically on the subject; however, the Selected Bibliography will assist the reader in learning much more about this kind of painting than could be included in the Thesis Report.

In conclusion I want to relate this information to my own work. The following personal thoughts may best summarize this Thesis Report-- "Borderline Imagery in Painting."

What I am most interested in, now, is the building of my own pictorial structure with forms that hint at natural relationships, but are more like analogies, or fragments of objects, which are recalled and used as the painting progresses.

I love to see the way things are--their structure and the way it is defined by light, their color and the patterns and shapes which develop in relation to one another. This is a strong formal

influence, and cubistic engineering in painting intrigues me. I think this is apparent in my work. But the object itself is also very appealing, for I have an almost sentimental sympathy with the things I see: this reaction too is important in my painting.

I want a dynamic balance between an order of formal compositional elements rationally related, and an imaginative deviation of a more irrational, or irregular, nature. To introduce the irrational I work in periods of primarily subconscious activity--it is here that my procedure comes closest to the Automatism discussed in Section VII of this report. By shifting gear from conscious to subconscious painting, I try to gain the total order.

With each painting I embark upon this adventure. I usually have a rather strong notion of what type (or even theme) I want, but I try not to allow a set mental picture to form or project itself upon my imagination too early in the work.

Technique may vary from painting to painting. I am not interested in finding a style, nor am I trying to be an innovator--I think this desire



is forced too much in art today. I enjoy making paintings, and I would like them to have important meaning: significance.

I am not trying to discover reality or spirituality through art (as mentioned in Section II, I have found these). There is an ethereal or "spiritual" quality in art--the esthetic. This has to do with its order and significance and I do work for this.

My interest in a combination of the reflected image of the eye and the symbolic image of the imagination requires abstraction. In my paintings the abstract is dominant most of the time but I would like to develop a better balance between the visual and the imaginative image.

I am interested in communication. The formal values should be strong, but if the painting is only an aesthetic experience with no associational values related to life, then borderline imagery is not functioning and pure abstract art would be more fitting.

In borderline imagery I want to give the viewer a heightened experience of surprise as he

discovers metaphorical and allusionary references to the world about him. I hope that he will see some of the allusions which the artist has found and tried to project, as well as some of his own.

The layers of images and the ghosts of images which lie behind the retinal experience, the mental notes, the visual vocabulary called forth in metaphor and allusion to make a language of vivid mental pictures--this is Borderline Imagery.



## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Robert Frost, Mountain Interval (New York: Henry Holt Company, 1916, 1921), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup>Holy Bible (London: Collins' Clear-Type Press), Gospel According to St. John 1:1-14.

<sup>3</sup>H. L. D. Jaffe, Twentieth Century Painting, trans. George Weidenfeld and Nocolson Ltd. (New York: The Viking Press, Inc., 1963), p. 2.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>6</sup>Etienne Gilson, Painting and Reality (Kingsport, Tennessee: Pantheon Books, Kingsport Press, Inc., 1957), p. 3.

<sup>7</sup>Christopher Gray, Cubist Aesthetic Theories (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1953), p. 98.

<sup>8</sup>Harold Rosenberg, Arshile Gorky The Man, The Time, The Idea (New York: Horizon Press, Inc., 1962), p. 56.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., pp. 55-56.

<sup>10</sup>Melvin Rader, A Modern Book of Esthetics (Third edition, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), p. 104.

<sup>11</sup>Marcel Jean, The History of Surrealist Painting (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1960), p. 126.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>13</sup>Isaac Kloomok, Marc Chagall: His Life and Work (New York: Philosophical Library, Inc., 1951), p. 25.

<sup>14</sup>Kurt Badt, The Art of Cezanne (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965), p. 270.

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